

Examining the PLA's Reform from an Organizational Adjustment Perspective

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Abstract

In 2016, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) underwent a reform that significantly reorganized its structure. Under the principle that "the Central Military Commission exercises overall control, the theater commands are responsible for military operations, and the services focus on developing capabilities," the PLA made corresponding adjustments to the upper echelons and gradually extended the reform to the grassroots. However, in April 2024, the PLA disbanded the Strategic Support Force established during the 2016 reform, splitting it into three independent arms. Does it mean that the 2016 reform failed to achieve goals such as integrated joint operations? The PLA has played a crucial role in events like the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Russo-Ukrainian War starting from 2022, and a series of military exercises directed at Taiwan in 2022, 2023, and 2024. Did the PLA also find certain problem during its participation in these events? The answer could lie in the PLA's latest reorganization efforts in 2024. This study aims to examine the changes in the PLA from the angle of organizational

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factors that are crucial to a revolution in military affairs, with the goal of understanding both the outcomes and shortcomings of the PLA's reform efforts since 2016 while also deepening insights into its future combat capabilities.

Keywords: Military Reform, Revolution in military affairs, PLA research, COVID-19, Russo-Ukrainian War

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● **Introduction**

In early 2022, the world closely watched as the war between Ukraine and Russia unfolded. By August of that year, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched military exercises around Taiwan, shifting global attention from Europe back to the Taiwan Strait. They were among the largest military drills conducted by the PLA since the Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis of 1996. Subsequently, in 2023 and 2024, the PLA once again carried out military exercises targeting Taiwan, attracting significant domestic and international attention. The focus of attention was on whether the PLA could demonstrate the effects of the 2016 reform and the resulting capabilities. Furthermore, following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, people across various sectors have questioned whether the PLA is a "paper tiger," similar to the Russian forces on the battlefield in Ukraine. Given the many similarities between the PLA and the Russian military in terms of organizational structure and armament, the actual capabilities of the former have thus become a topic of discussion among external observers.

Moreover, although the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has impacted the global economy and the supply of energy and food, Taiwan's national security has not been significantly affected due to the considerable geographical distance between Taiwan and Ukraine. However, in August 2022, when then-U.S.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, China launched large-scale military exercises encircling the island, once again demonstrating that it has never abandoned use of force against the ROC government. Subsequently, in 2023 and 2024, China conducted further military exercises targeting Taiwan, specifically the “Joint Sword” drills, which have now become regularized. The exercises show that, following the 2016 reform, the PLA have acquired capabilities far surpassing those it possessed during the 1996 missile crisis. The transformation represents that the PLA has evolved from an ill-equipped force carrying “millet and rifles” into a modernized and digitized military capable of joint operations--no longer a “junkyard army” or “the world’s largest military museum,” as it was once sarcastically called.¹ This progress stems not only from lessons learned through the PLA’s engagements with foreign forces but also from its observations and studies of various post-Cold War conflicts. Furthermore, the PLA took advantage of the outflow of military research and development specialists following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, enhancing its own defense research capabilities and laying the foundation for its military-industrial sector.² At the end of

¹ Alexander Huang. “Examining Research on the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Tamkang School: A Review of 20 Years of Experience,” in *Contemporary Strategic Theory and Practice*, Ming-hsien Wong, eds. New Taipei City: Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies, Tamkang University, (2011): 247-249.

² Mikhail Barabanov, Vasily Kashin, and Konstantin Makienko. *Shooting Star: China's Military Machine in the 21st Century: A Report by the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies*. Minnesota: East View Press, (2012);

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2015, the PLA underwent its most extensive military reform since the era of Deng Xiaoping. This reform focused on restructuring the PLA, including reorganizing the four general departments of the Central Military Commission (CMC), reducing the seven military regions to five theater commands, and clearly defining the principle that "the Central Military Commission exercises overall control, the theater commands are responsible for military operations, and the services focus on developing capabilities." The establishment of the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) also contributed to the formation of a new command and control structure.³

A comprehensive examination of China's defense modernization reveals that its strategic guidance has evolved through lessons learned and stimuli from real-world war cases, while its weaponry and equipment have advanced alongside technological progress and foreign acquisitions--constructing military modernization through the integration of hardware and software. However, military strength is not solely dependent on advanced weaponry; organizational structure plays a more critical role in combat effectiveness. It was a top priority of the 2016

Ming Cheung Tai. *China's Emergence as a Defense Technological Power*. New York: Routledge, (2012).

³ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders. *Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*. Washington D.C: National Defense University Press, (2017), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-10.pdf>

reform, which was further extended to grassroots units in 2017. The extension was described as the reform reaching areas "from the neck down," involving the consolidation of grassroots units and military academies.⁴ Nevertheless, in 2024, the PLA implemented another organizational change, specifically the deactivation of the corps-level SSF established in 2016 and the reorganization of the force into three independent arms.⁵ Does it signify the failure of the reform, or does it highlight shortcomings that would emerge under new stimuli? These questions deserve more consideration.

From 2016 to 2024, the PLA's weapons and equipment have advanced significantly, driven by China's scientific and technological progress. Whether in stealth fighter jets, aircraft carriers, various warships equipped with advanced combat systems, or hypersonic missiles, the PLA has demonstrated considerable advancements in military technology. However, in terms of organizational changes, the 2016 reform resembled a major surgical operation on the PLA. After the surgery, could the "patient" regain its health or become even stronger--more combat-capable in military terms? Or did new organizational

⁴ Chun Li. "The 'Below-the-Neck' Reform Begins: How Military Reform Adapts to Changing Circumstances?" China Military Online, February 27, (2017). http://www.81.cn/2017qglh/2017-02/27/content_7503829.htm.

⁵ Xiao Ming Li. "Press Conference on the Establishment of the Information Support Force," People's Daily Online, April 20, (2024). <http://military.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2024/0420/c1011-40219744.html>.

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issues emerge during the recovery process, prompting China to implement another structural adjustment in April 2024? How will these developments affect the future combat strength of the PLA? This paper aims to examine these questions.

● The PLA's restructuring in 2016

Generally speaking, the process of a country's defense modernization can be divided into four stages: theoretical exploration, technological development, organizational establishment, and talent cultivation.⁶ Since the Gulf War of 1991, the PLA has come to understand new types of warfare in the new era and has begun extensively translating relevant foreign research materials. In particular, after the Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis of 1996, the PLA further solidified its understanding of how to conduct local wars under high-tech conditions. Following the War in Afghanistan (2001 to 2021) and the Iraq War (2003), the PLA recognized that information technology is key to battlefield victory. It introduced a defense policy focused on developing military strategies to win local wars under informationized conditions.⁷ However, due to insufficient

⁶ Peter Mattis. *Analyzing the Chinese Military: A Review Essay and Resource Guide on the People's Liberation Army*. South Carolina: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, (2015).35

⁷ Rui Xue Bai, Zheng Yan Xiong, and Zhi Hui Li. "China's Active Defense Military Strategy Has Undergone Multiple Adjustments," *People's Daily Online*, May 26, (2015).

<http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0526/c172467-27057937.html>.

technological capabilities, the PLA was unable to implement the concept of informationized warfare. During Hu Jintao's tenure, China leveraged its rapid economic growth to establish a foundation for technological advancement. Later, under the 2016 military reform initiated by Xi Jinping, efforts were concentrated on restructuring the PLA's command and control structure to meet the demands of modern warfare. Additionally, reforms in military academy were introduced with the goal of achieving the modernization of national defense and the armed forces by 2035.⁸

The PLA gradually recognized its inferiority to the U.S. military after the 1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis and the 2003 Iraq War. It identified its primary goal as enhancing the informatization of its equipment to transition its forces from mechanization toward informatization. In any revolution in military affairs, the first challenge to overcome is technological development. With the rapid growth of China's economy, the PLA could have a sufficient budget to upgrade its equipment and significantly boost its overall strength. However, equipment is not the sole indicator of military strength. Without an effectively integrated command mechanism, the armed forces of a nation will still be vulnerable even if they possess the best equipment in the world. Especially in the era of informationized warfare, command,

⁸ Shu Yin He. "PLA Daily Commentator: Comprehensively Advancing the Modernization of National Defense and the Armed Forces," Ministry of National Defense of China, March 21, (2023).<http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/16210796.html>.

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control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems can facilitate the rapid transmission of information with the support of information technology. However, if power is exercised through overly layered bureaucratic structures or management frameworks that fail to meet the demands of joint operations, the strength of a military will be constrained. PLA-related research has also observed that while the PLA has undoubtedly built its joint operations on technological advancements that enable swift battlefield information flow, it may not be able to fully exploit the advantages of informatization if its organizational structure remains a traditional hierarchy requiring multiple levels of approval before decisions can be made.⁹ Before the 2016 reform, the commanders of the seven military regions were primarily from the army, raising doubts about their ability to effectively command naval and air forces within their jurisdiction. These were among the challenges the PLA faced before the 2016 reform.

Since Xi assumed the chairmanship of the CMC at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, he has introduced significant changes to the PLA. The previously emphasized principles of “political competence, military excellence, exemplary conduct, strict discipline, and robust support” were revised to “Follow the Party's command,

⁹ Xiao Han and Kejia Sun. *Research on Issues in the Critical Period of Contemporary Chinese Military Reform*. Beijing: National Defense University Press, March, (2017): 46–57.

win battles, and maintain exemplary conduct.¹⁰” The “Party” here refers to the CPC. This reiterates the absolute obedience of the PLA to the CPC’s command, a point Xi has consistently emphasized in every speech he delivered on military affairs at the 18th to the 20th National Congresses.¹¹ This further reinforces that while “the Party commands the gun” has always been a fundamental tenet of the CPC, the principle that “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” remains an unchanging iron rule.

● The process of the military reform

The military reform pushed forward by Xi can be traced back to March 2014, when the “Central Military Commission Leading Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform” was established. The establishment of the leading group sparked media speculations about the anticipated military reform,¹² but widespread skepticism remained regarding whether a traditional robust military like the PLA could undergo a

¹⁰ Wei Zheng Shao and Bu Qian Li. *Following the Party's Command*. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2014): 235–240.

¹¹ Yi Biao Wang. “Deeply Understanding the Major Arrangements of the 20th Party Congress on Upholding the Party's Comprehensive Leadership and Strict Governance,” *People's Daily Online*, January 3, (2023).
<http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2023/0103/c40531-32598865.html>.

¹² Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders. *Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*,
<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-10.pdf?ver=2017-03-21-152018-430>.

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complete transformation in a short period. Subsequently, in September 2015, Xi announced a reduction of 300,000 troops during a military parade. In November 2015, the military reform officially commenced. The reform focused on reorganizing the four general departments of the CMC into 15 functional units, transforming the seven military regions into five theater commands, establishing the Army Headquarters, activating the SSF and the JLSF, renaming the Second Artillery Corps as the Rocket Force, and formally instituting the command principle: “The Central Military Commission exercises overall control, the theater commands are responsible for military operations, and the services focus on developing capabilities.”¹³

As is widely recognized, the four key elements--fighting, equipment, organization, and training--form the fundamental principles of force construction. When China designated the 2003 Iraq War as the guiding reference for its military development, it became clear that integrated joint operations would play a leading role in future warfare.¹⁴ This is what the "fighting" mentioned above refers to. During China's rapid economic growth in recent decades, the PLA has acquired high-tech technologies from

¹³Ying Yu Lin. “The Implications of China’s Military Reforms,” *The Diplomat*, March 7, (2016).

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/the-implications-of-chinas-military-reforms/>

¹⁴ Ya Ming Li and Tai Wu Chen. *The Deep Structure of the Communist China’s Military Reform: Changes and Constants in Communist Chinese Military Thought*. Taipei: College of Political Warfare, National Defense University, (2012): 99–107.

abroad through both legal purchases and illicit means, applying them to newly developed equipment and enhancing its capability to engage in modern warfare. However, without corresponding structural reforms, high-tech equipment cannot be effectively utilized, let alone facilitate joint operations. Unlike previous forms of combined or coordinated operations between branches or arms, integrated joint operations emphasize a cross-service command structure that merges different military services and operational domains into a unified, interconnected combat model, with organizational integration serving as the key factor.¹⁵

Before the 2016 military reform, some Chinese military researchers had already identified issues related to organizational adjustments and recognized that an effective command system would be crucial in maximizing the efficiency of system-based operations and joint warfare.¹⁶ However, in the relatively closed environment of the military, implementing reforms has always been a difficult task--especially in the PLA, which places strong emphasis on following the CPC's command. This further illustrates the significant impact of the 2016 reform on the PLA.

¹⁵ Military Strategy Research Department, Academy of Military Sciences. Strategic Studies. Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, (2013): 124–127.

¹⁶ Zhen Fan Min and Bao Cun Wang. The Organizational System for Constructing an Informatized Military. Li Zhang eds. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2005): 304–309; Wei Feng Han, Yong Sheng Kang, and Ling Juan Kong. Combat-Oriented Military Reform. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2015): 90–103.

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● The reorganization of the CMC

This military reform reorganized the outdated command system of the PLA into a new structure suited for integrated joint operations.¹⁷ Prior to the reform, although the PLA had a mechanism for transitioning from military regions to theater commands, the peacetime management system represented by the seven major military regions was not conducive to integrated joint operations. The army-centric logistics system and the administrative nature of the seven major military regions, which primarily focused on land defense, were insufficient to meet modern warfare challenges.¹⁸ Before the reform, the PLA's command system was primarily managed through the seven major military regions, which were divided based on strategic needs and encompassed first-level units across the services. These regions were under the direct leadership of the General Staff Department of the CMC, overseeing military affairs within their jurisdiction, including militia mobilization and troop conscription.¹⁹ However, since the seven major military regions were demarcated based on geographic divisions, they were

¹⁷ Tian You Ren. "An Exploration of Certain Mechanisms for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform," in *Strong Military Forum*, Chinese Military Culture Society, eds. Beijing: People's Publishing House, (2017): 47–52.

¹⁸ Yan Xu. "The Farewell of the Major Military Region System from China's Military Stage," in *Strong Military Strategy*, Yazhou Liu, Zhi Cao, and Tiezhu Zhang, eds. Shanghai: Shanghai Yuandong Chubanshe, (2016): 350–353.

¹⁹ Tao Guan and Li Yao. *The Military Geography of China's Theater Commands*. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2005): 4–5.

naturally subject to army control. Consequently, the PLA's ground forces did not have a dedicated Army Headquarters before the reform and were instead directly managed by the General Staff Department.

At that time, maritime and aerial conflicts in China's surrounding regions continued to intensify. The roles of naval and air forces thus became increasingly important. However, questions arose as to whether military region commanders, who predominantly came from the army, had the authority to command naval and air forces within their jurisdiction. In particular, the PLA has been primarily led by the CMC from past to present. Before the 2016 reform, CMC members still included the commanders of the navy and air force. That was where uncertainties arose. While military region commanders held the rank of general, naval and air forces within their jurisdiction faced a dilemma due to the PLA's rank-based hierarchy: whether to follow the orders of their military region commanders or to take command from their respective service chiefs, who were also members of the CMC. Under the previous system, these issues posed challenges to the PLA's command and control structure.²⁰

²⁰ Kenneth Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, Jr.. "The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What is Known, Unknown and Speculation," China Brief, February, (2016).
https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CB_16_3_2.pdf?x11163.

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“The reorganization of the PLA,” according to the principle of “the CMC chairman overall responsibility system. To establish a command-and-control mechanism suited for modern joint operations, the PLA had to undergo structural reforms—one of the main reasons for Xi to push for the military reform.²¹ The most crucial aspect of the 2016 military reform was the establishment of the principle: “The Central Military Commission exercises overall control, the theater commands are responsible for military operations, and the services focus on developing capabilities.” This reform formally restructured the CMC, retaining the Chairman, two Vice Chairmen, the Joint Staff Department (formerly the General Staff Department), the Political Work Department (formerly the General Political Department), the Ministry of National Defense, and the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. The General Armaments Department and the General Logistics Department of the CMC were dissolved, and service commanders were removed from the organization. Furthermore, the reform explicitly granted the commanders of the five theater commands--Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central--the authority to oversee ground, naval, air, rocket, and People’s Armed Police forces within their jurisdiction. This solidified the principle that theater commands are responsible for coordinating combat operations while clarifying the command

²¹ Ke Hai Wang, Bing Wang, and Zheng Rong Cao. *Research on Integrated Joint Operations*. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2005): 27.

structure for integrated joint operations.²² The post-reform PLA consisted of five services: the Army, the Navy, the Air force, the Second Artillery Corps-turned Rocket Force, and the newly-created SSF.²³

● The significance of an independent service or arm

Furthermore, regarding the PLA's command, control, communications, and intelligence system, a Chinese military researcher pointed out that separate information networks within different services hinder the advancement of integrated joint operations. Even with the integration of various systems across the services, each service still independently manages its own systems, resulting in unnecessary redundancies and unclear divisions of authority. The researcher argued that there is a need to establish a new, independent, information-based military

²² Feng Dai, Yu Gen Wang, and Guang Yi Luo. "Shouldering the Historic Responsibility of Pioneering and Establishing the Theater—Interview with Eastern Theater Commander Liu Yuejun," China Military Online, March 4, (2016).
http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/zhuantu/content/2016-03/04/content_6940918.htm ;
Qing Gang Yang, Zhao Ping Qin, and Guo Tao Zhao. "Commander of the Central Theater Command Han Weiguo: A Detailed Explanation of Seven Differences Between Theater Commands and Major Military Regions," China Military Online, March 7, (2016).
http://www.81.cn/zbzq/2016-03/07/content_6945985.htm.

²³ Yen Ching Weng. *The History and Military Strength of the Chinese Communist Party and Its Threat to Taiwan*. Taipei: Hsin Rui Creative Publishing House, (2023): 196.

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service to consolidate information management and achieve dominance in the electromagnetic spectrum.²⁴

During the 2016 reform, the PLA put similar units previously scattered among different departments and services under the SSF. The restructuring included ground-based aerospace systems and astronaut management units,²⁵ cyber warfare units, and certain public opinion warfare units. Command, control, communications, and intelligence systems for electronic communications were managed by a newly-established, independent corps-level department under the theater-level SSF.²⁶ The SSF was at the same grade as the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force. It did not take command from theater commands but was instead directly subordinate to the CMC as an independent service.²⁷ This organizational design resolved the earlier problem of separate services independently managing their own tactical data

²⁴ Guo Xing Xu. *Research on the Construction of Chinese Military's Information Warfare Combat Power*. Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, (2013): 64.

²⁵ Wu Dang and Ke Jin Zhang. "How Does the Military Determine Preliminary Candidates for the 19th National Congress Representatives?" China Military Online, May 25, (2017).
http://zb.81.cn/content/2017-05/25/content_7617929_2.htm.

²⁶ Ying Yu Lin. "The Missions and Scale of the PLA's Strategic Support Force," *Prospect & Exploration*, 15, no. 10 (2017): 117–119.

²⁷ John Chen, Joe McReynolds, and Kieran Green. "The PLA Strategic Support Force: A 'Joint' Force for Information Operations," in *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, and Andrew N.D. Yang eds. Washington D.C: National Defense University Press, (2021).153-155

systems. Using a single military service as the framework for a unified network system could save implementation time but risked making that service overly dominant. The PLA, eager to break free from traditional constraints, sought to avoid such an outcome. Therefore, the establishment of the independent SSF resolved the problem of each service operating in its own way. It also contributed to the integration of cyber warfare units previously scattered across the General Staff Department, General Political Department, and service branches into the SSF's network systems department, preventing redundancies and unclear divisions of authority. Regarding aerospace affairs, the SSF was responsible only for backend satellite remote sensing, while satellite launch center management and rocket technology development remained under the Equipment Development Department of the CMC, the former General Armaments Department.

The military reform enforced by Xi, in addition to promoting integrated joint operations, also focused on enhancing the logistics system. In September 2016, the PLA established the JLSF as the primary force providing joint logistics support and strategic campaign support. Previously, the General Logistics Department managed logistics across all services, directly coordinating with the seven military regions under an army-centric framework, while the navy and air force operated within their own systems. Such a division could not meet the

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demands of modern joint operations. Although there was a mechanism enabling the seven military regions led by the General Staff Department to transition from an administrative management system to a CMC-led joint operations system during wartime, doubts remained about whether the logistics system could adapt just as swiftly during the shift from peacetime to wartime operations. The PLA recognized this problem, but transferring power and responsibilities from military regions to theater commands would create tensions between central and local authorities. Although attempts were made to reform the PLA's organization, such as the experimental introduction of a unified logistics system in the Jinan Military Region in 2007, it was merely a single-region "pilot" program, far from a fully implemented project across the entire military. The experiment in the Jinan Military Region demonstrated that only by reforming the overall PLA structure could joint logistics be effectively improved.²⁸ However, this task could not be completed quickly due to the number of units to be involved and the potential need for a comprehensive restructuring of the PLA.

Following the reform, the General Logistics Department was restructured into the Logistics Support Department and downgraded in status, as evidenced by its chief's removal from CMC membership and reassignment as a theater

²⁸ Chuan Xin Yu, ed. *Joint Logistics Course*. Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, (2011): 52–54.

commander-grade leader. The department head's exclusion from the list of CMC members was followed by the establishment of the JLSF, with its commander at the grade of theater deputy commander, in September 2016 as an independent service alongside the Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, and SSF. This fundamentally reshaped the PLA's logistics system. The JLSF, directly subordinate to the CMC, features the Joint Logistics Support Base in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The Wuhan base oversees five Joint Logistics Support Centers located in Jiangsu Province's Wuxi, Guangxi Province's Guilin, Qinghai Province's Xining, Liaoning Province's Shenyang, and Henan Province's Zhengzhou. These centers provide logistics support to the theater commands in which they are located. The service's primary mission is to break down barriers between different services, unify resource allocation, and shift its focus from primarily supporting the Army to providing medical and logistical support to all military components in any theater. The post-reform Logistics Support Department is responsible for logistics planning and budgeting, while the JLSF serves as the executing entity. Under the principle that "the theater commands are responsible for military operations and the services focus on developing capabilities," the PLA's logistics system has undergone a considerable restructuring.²⁹

²⁹ Tian Liang Xiao, ed. *Strategic Studies*. Beijing: National Defense University Press, (2020): 413–414.

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Following the reform, the PLA's restructured organization not only enhances the effectiveness of joint operations and logistics but also places both the SSF--throughout its activation and deactivation--and the JLSF directly under the CMC. This grants the CMC direct control over theater-level field forces. In modern warfare, intelligence and logistics are indispensable. The SSF, which was responsible for C4ISR and aerospace operations, was not under the control of any theater command—nor has been the JLSF, responsible for theater logistics, been under such control.³⁰ This means that by retaining direct authority over intelligence, information, and logistical resources, the CMC maintains control over theater forces, preventing unchecked decision-making by theater commanders.

Nevertheless, challenges persist within the newly established military services and arms. For instance, the SSF, tasked with aerospace affairs, cyber operations, and C4ISR, might have been overloaded with an excessively broad range of responsibilities. This raised concerns about whether its leadership could effectively manage these specialized domains. Moreover, the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2022, has once again demonstrated that the nature of war continues to evolve. This raised questions about whether the command-and-control system established in the 2016 reform remains suitable for contemporary

³⁰ Wen Chung Chai. "The Organization and Missions of the PLA Strategic Support Force," *Defense Strategy and Assessment*, 13, no. 1 (2013): 81.

military conflicts. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic in China in 2020, the PLA played a critical role in supporting efforts to combat the pandemic. The mobilization of military resources during this period also served as a test for the JLSF.³¹ These events provided valuable opportunities to assess the strength of the post-reform PLA.

● **The impact of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the PLA's restructuring**

Despite the sweeping military reform implemented by Xi in 2016, the PLA's peacetime operations appear to function normally without any major issues. The new organizational structure has even been tested in various training exercises. However, without the trial of actual combat, it is impossible to truly assess the reform's effect on the PLA's performance. Nevertheless, in peacetime, military exercises and disaster relief operations serve as the best indicators of a military's capabilities--especially when responding to unpredictable crises like natural disasters or pandemics. Flexible troop command and the overall operational structure of the armed forces become critical in such situations. Moreover, the Russo-Ukrainian War has introduced significant changes to modern warfare, including new tactical and

³¹ Wen Tao Zhang, "New Achievements in Military Reform: The Important Role of the Joint Logistics Support Force in Fighting the Pandemic," Special issue on China's national defense force behind the fight against the pandemic, *Ordnance Industry Science Technology*, no. 5 (2022): 89.

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technological applications. Whether these developments will substantially impact the restructured PLA remains a key concern for outside observers.³²

● The post-reform PLA put to the test during the pandemic³³

In January 2020, COVID-19 broke out in China and soon spread globally. Given the limitations of China's emergency response system, the PLA was called upon to assist in what became a disaster-like situation. Unlike military exercises, emergency response and disaster relief missions are fraught with unpredictability. The transportation of supplies and deployment of relief forces test a military's logistics support, military-civilian coordination, medical services, and even reserve mobilization mechanism--all of which reflect the overall readiness of the armed forces.³⁴

³² "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022." Royal United Services Institute, Accessed November.30, 2022.

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

³³ Ying Yu Lin. "The Role and System of the PLA Medical and Health Service System in Facing the Pandemic: A Comparison Before and After Military Reform," *Mainland China Studies*, 65, no. 3, (2022): 81–96.

³⁴ Ji Wei Guo. *War for Biological Dominance*. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, (2010): 143, 191.

In the PLA's efforts to support the fight against the pandemic, the military medical system played a highly effective role. After the 2016 reform, the medical system was decentralized across different services and theaters. Although the newly established JLSF could mobilize medical resources through the joint logistics support centers in the five theaters and military hospitals under the Wuhan Joint Logistics Support Base, military hospitals under the services were not effectively mobilized. The main reason was that at that time, both the JLSF and the services reported directly to the CMC--a condition that remains unchanged. However, while the commanders of the services are at the grade of theater commander, the JLSF commander is only a theater deputy commander-grade leader.³⁵ The performance of the PLA during the fight against the pandemic revealed several areas for improvement in the post-reform logistics system. Issues such as the division of responsibilities between the JLSF and theater-level service forces, the allocation of support forces, and the delegation of approval authority were not resolved during the reform's restructuring. It indicates that the administrative capabilities of the PLA failed to keep up with the military reform. Although the

³⁵ Shu Fan Ding. "The PLA and COVID-19: Challenges of Logistics Mobilization After Military Reform," *Prospect & Exploration*, 18, no. 3 (2020): 2–8.

required personnel were in place, they still needed time to achieve effective coordination.³⁶

● **Stimuli from the Russo-Ukrainian War**

The military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022, drew global attention for an extended period. Russia was unable to end the war quickly, and its insufficient logistical support caused the fighting to be prolonged till now. Meanwhile, Ukraine lacked sufficient combat personnel, preventing it from making decisive breakthroughs on the front lines. A stalemate was thus formed and continues to the moment.³⁷ For the PLA, the conflict holds particular significance due to notable similarities between the Russian military's equipment, organizational structures, and tactical doctrines and those of the PLA.³⁸ China also closely examines the effects of integrating public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and

³⁶ Jun Li, Ming Yue Ma, Hong Guang Zhou, Yang Zhao, Xiao Lin Han, and Shu Sen Guo.

“Development Opportunities and Challenges for Division-Level Hospitals of the Joint Logistics

Support Force,” *Hospital Administration Journal of Chinese People's Liberation Army*, 27, no. 11, (2020): 1035–1038.

³⁷ Ching Yen Huang and Chih Hung Dai. *Contemporary Russian Military Power and the War in Ukraine*. Taipei: Hanlu Book and Publishing Company, (2023): 655–662.

³⁸ Chih Te Yuan. *Soviet Influence in Chinese Military Thought: The Soviet Strategic Roots in CCP Military Doctrine*. Taichung: Yueh Hsiang Digital Printing Co., (2012).135

cognitive warfare into military operations.³⁹ As a result, the Russo-Ukrainian War has become a key case study for the PLA, offering valuable lessons and insights to refine future military operations.⁴⁰

The battles of the Russo-Ukrainian War have once again demonstrated the critical importance of C4ISR. While unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, have achieved significant combat results, the achievement does not solely depend on the UAVs themselves. Instead, the key factor is the backend control system and the seamless flow of the information network.⁴¹ This is what truly enables drones to function efficiently. In aerospace technology, both the Global Positioning System (GPS) of the U.S. and Russia's GLONASS satellite navigation system have proven to be indispensable auxiliary tools in modern warfare. These

³⁹ Chung Han Wu. "An Analysis of the Cognitive Warfare Capabilities of the PLA Strategic Support Force," *Prospect Quarterly*, 24, no. 4, (2023): 15.

⁴⁰ Editorial Department of Shipborne Weapons. "Encirclement Warfare in the Field: Insights on the Taiwan Issue from the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Shipborne Weapons*, no. 6 (2022): 8–14; Ying Yu Lin. "What the PLA Is Learning From Russia's Ukraine Invasion," *The Diplomat*, April 20, (2022). <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/what-the-pla-is-learning-from-russias-ukraine-invasion/>.

⁴¹ "The Orlan Complex: Tracking the Supply Chains of Russia's Most Successful UAV." Royal United Services Institute, Accessed December 15, 2022. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/orlan-complex-tracking-supply-chains-russias-most-successful-uav>.

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developments introduce new dynamics in modern warfare, as observed in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.⁴²

Furthermore, these responsibilities were not fully consolidated under the SSF during the reform. Instead, many tasks continued to be handled by different services and organizations directly under the CMC. For example, in aerospace operations, while the aerospace systems department of the SSF managed remote sensing systems, satellite launch centers remained under the Equipment Development Department of the CMC. Moreover, rocket launch vehicles were still tied to the Rocket Force's equipment development, and ground-based auxiliary radar operations still required Air Force support.⁴³ Such a redundant layering of responsibilities was detrimental to the maximization of combat capabilities in the increasingly important field of aerospace operations. In contrast, the U.S. military established the Space Force to integrate all space-related operations under a single command. The organization of the post-reform PLA still left significant room for improvement. Similar problems also arose at the information communication

⁴² Col. Markus Reisner. "Krieg in der Ukraine: Die Erfolgsgeschichte der ukrainischen Artillerie," interview by Österreichs Bundesheer, May 20, (2022). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzAl29Gl9MA>.

⁴³ Lt. Gen. R. S. Panwar. "China's Strategic Support Force and Its Implications for India, Part I: Concept, Organisation and Space Operations," *Future Wars*, June 9, (2020). <https://futurewars.rspanwar.net/chinas-special-support-force-and-its-implications-for-india-part-i/>

base of the SSF. Although the SSF took charge of the C4ISR system for the entire military, its corps-level arms faced difficulties when interacting with higher echelons, such as the theater-level services and theater units. As a result, although the SSF was established out of necessity during the reform, its subordinate units were not granted sufficient authority, making it difficult for them to take a leading role in interactions with relevant units.

Such issues could also be understood by examining the backgrounds of the commanders of the SSF from its activation to deactivation. The first SSF commander, Gao Jin, came from the Second Artillery Corps, now the Rocket Force. Compared with the Army, Navy, and Air Force, the Second Artillery Corps possessed a higher degree of technological specialization, making it more compatible with a tech-driven service like the SSF.⁴⁴ However, the second SSF commander, Li Fengbiao, spent his military career primarily in airborne forces and lacked a high-tech background.⁴⁵ The third commander, Ju Qiansheng, came from the technical reconnaissance department of the General Staff

⁴⁴ “Commander of the Strategic Support Force Gao Jin.” Wen Wei Po, Accessed January 2, 2016.
<http://paper.wenweipo.com/2016/01/02/CH1601020011.htm>.

⁴⁵ “Former Commander of the Strategic Support Force Transferred to Political Commissar of the Western Theater Command.” Oriental Daily News, Accessed January 26, 2022.
https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/cnnews/20220129/bkn-20220129100225864-0129_00952_001.html.

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Department and had experience in information-related fields.⁴⁶ Although most of the SSF's successive deputy commanders had expertise in aerospace operations--such as Li Shangfu, Shang Hong, and Hao Weizhong, all of whom had aerospace technology-related backgrounds--or specialized in cyber warfare, like Zheng Junjie, the complexity of the service's tasks made it difficult to find a leader with expertise in every field who could effectively manage all aspects. These issues became evident in the operations of the SSF after its formation. The Russo-Ukrainian War has further underscored the growing importance of cyber warfare, aerospace systems, and C4ISR. The organizational structure of the SSF, established in 2016, might no longer be sufficient to meet the demands of modern warfare.⁴⁷

On April 19, 2024, the PLA officially disbanded the SSF. In the newly announced organizational structure of the PLA, the Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force still maintain their theater-level status, while the SSF's three former corps-level arms--the aerospace systems department, responsible for space operations; the cyber systems department, tasked with cyber warfare; and the information communication base, which

⁴⁶ Kai Hsiang You. "PLA Generals Who Understand Hacker Mindset Step Out; Scholar Warns Taiwan to Be Cautious in Information Warfare," Central News Agency, July 7, (2021). <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202107070053.aspx>.

⁴⁷ Central News Agency. "PLA Establishes Information Support Force; Experts Say It Helps Improve Joint Operations System," Central News Agency, April 28, (2024). <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202404280143.aspx>.

managed C4ISR—have been reorganized into the Aerospace Force, the Cyber Force, and the Information Support Force respectively.⁴⁸ If the three newly established forces share the same grade as the JLSF, it means that the former theater-level SSF has been reorganized into three theater deputy commander-grade arms, with their commanders holding the rank of lieutenant general/vice admiral or general/admiral. The newly-formed Aerospace Force might have been modeled after the U.S. Space Force, while the Cyber Force resembles the U.S. Cyber Command. This restructuring indicates that the 2016 reform might not have been sufficient to fully deal with the challenges of modern warfare. The Russo-Ukrainian War has made the PLA keenly aware of the need for further structural adjustments to ensure that the Aerospace Force, Cyber Force, and Information Support Force receive direct command from the CMC as theater deputy commander-grade forces.⁴⁹ The theater deputy commander-grade status allows them to interact more effectively with theater commands and the services. They also cooperate with the JLSF, demonstrating the CMC's effective control over military intelligence and logistics. Regardless of how the PLA's

⁴⁸ Jia Rong Lu. "China Disbands Strategic Support Force and Establishes Information Support Force," Central News Agency, April 19, (2024). <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202404190314.aspx>.

⁴⁹ Ying Yu Lin and Tzu Hao Liao. "RIP, SSF: Unpacking the PLA's Latest Restructuring," The Diplomat, April 24, (2024). <https://thediplomat.com/diplomat-brief/2024/vol17/index.html>.

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organizational structure changes, maintaining centralized control by the CMC remains an unchanging principle.

● The deep-rooted corruption in the military

Shortly after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Russian military launched a three-front offensive against Ukraine, even posing a significant threat to Kyiv at one point. However, as the conflict dragged on and Ukrainian forces mounted counteroffensives, Russia's advances were significantly hindered.⁵⁰ Following the Chechen Wars in the 1990s, Russia implemented a series of military reforms to reorganize its defense structure. Unlike the Soviet era, which prioritized the development of nuclear weapons and ground forces, the post-Cold War Russian military first had to deal with issues such as fragmented troop command, theft and illicit sales of military supplies, inflated budget reports, and corruption--problems that continue to plague the Russian military today.⁵¹

The CPC's fight against corruption has never stopped. Since 2012, quite a few high-ranking generals at the CMC level, including Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, Fang Fenghui, and Zhang Yang, have been implicated in corruption scandals. By 2023, even

⁵⁰ Royal United Services Institute, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022,"

⁵¹ Shu Yin Li, Ji Chang Wang, and Xi Zhang. *An Analysis of Russian Military Intelligence*. Beijing: PLA Publishing House, (2018): 124–125.

former Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and his successor Li Shangfu were disciplined for corruption, and several Rocket Force leaders were dismissed for similar irregularities.⁵² These incidents indicate that despite the chilling effect caused by the downfall of the “Xu-Guo clique,” corruption remains deeply entrenched within the PLA. The problem has not been eradicated by any military reforms or Xi’s hard-line approach; instead, it continues to surface repeatedly within the PLA.

During the military exercises that China conducted around Taiwan in 2022, various types of Dongfeng-series missiles were launched to achieve intimidation effects, with several even flying over Taiwan proper before landing in the Pacific Ocean. Notably, Chinese state media reported that a total of 16 missiles were fired, while Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense stated that only 11 had been detected. Was it possible that five missiles failed to launch? This doubt sparked discussions about the Rocket Force’s equipment readiness rate. Although there has been no direct evidence to confirm the speculation, the recent drastic personnel reshuffles within the Rocket Force--especially among its leadership--suggest that internal corruption has become a serious issue.⁵³ The appointment of two officers from other

⁵² Ying Yu Lin. “Examining PLA Combat Power Through Rocket Force Leadership Changes,” *Prospect & Exploration*, 21, no. 9, (2023): 30–36.

⁵³ Ying Yu Lin. “PLA Personnel Shakeups And Their Implications,” *China Brief*, February 2, (2024).
<https://jamestown.org/program/pla-personnel-shakeups-and-their-implications/>

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services--neither with prior experience in the Rocket Force or its predecessor, the Second Artillery Corps--as the new commander and political commissar of the Rocket Force underscores the need to rely on personnel from outside the force to restore its effectiveness. Real-world cases from the Russo-Ukrainian War demonstrate that corruption severely weakens combat strength. It is one of the greatest factors that will affect the PLA's combat capabilities.

● Conclusion

The 2016 reform laid the foundation for the PLA's organizational restructuring efforts. The resulting structural adjustments were expected to enable the PLA to engage in modern warfare. The goal of these reform efforts was to develop integrated joint operations capabilities.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, China introduced another significant change to the structure of the PLA in April 2024. The main reason behind this might have been issues with the coordination of organizations established during the reform, which did not become apparent until the PLA's involvement in the fight against the pandemic in 2020. The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 also gave the PLA an opportunity to observe and better understand the nature of modern warfare. These factors may have influenced the PLA's decision to restructure once more. It represents that the structure

⁵⁴ Tian Liang Xiao, ed. *Strategic Studies*, 339.

of a military will evolve not only because of technological innovations but also in response to changes in warfare and advancements in equipment. This idea underpins the concept of “fighting, equipment, organization, and training,” which is frequently referred to in military affairs. The first step is to determine the type of war to engage in, followed by acquiring new equipment and technological applications. Next, command and control structures should be established based on the nature of the conflict. Finally, the effectiveness of these new structures must be verified through training exercises. The PLA is no exception. A major concern for the PLA is whether the new structures will function effectively. Another pressing issue is the potential emergence of new issues in future military operations. The answers have yet to be found out.

In addition to the four elements that shape a military—fighting, equipment, organization, and training—personnel quality is also a crucial factor in determining combat effectiveness. While assessing the actual capabilities of service members remains a difficult task, the PLA’s ongoing anti-corruption campaign suggests that internal corruption is still an unresolved issue. As previously mentioned, following the downfall of former CMC leaders Xu and Guo, four other military leaders—Fang, Zhang, Wei, and Li—were disciplined for corruption in succession. Wei was promoted to the rank of general by Xi, while Li was a princeling, belonging to the

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second-generation of the CPC's founding members.⁵⁵ Even the Rocket Force leadership was deeply embroiled in corruption, leading to the replacement of its commander and political commissar with appointees from the Navy and Air Force, rather than officers promoted from within the force itself.⁵⁶ Such personnel appointments are similar to the PLA's approach during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, when laymen led experts and political loyalty was prioritized over professional expertise. Could this practice be counter-productive to the increasingly professionalized PLA? Although the PLA has made significant progress in developing doctrine, technology, and organizational structure, its prioritization of loyalty over expertise raises the question of whether it can withstand the test of actual combat. After all, war is fought by individual soldiers, making individual competence the most crucial factor. Within the framework of party-military relations in the PLA, will new networks of corruption emerge? Such developments would have direct implications for the PLA's overall combat effectiveness.

⁵⁵ Central News Agency. "Two Successive Chinese Defense Ministers Removed for Massive Corruption: Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu Expelled from the Party," Central News Agency, June 27, (2024).
<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202406270380.aspx>.

⁵⁶ Shi Feng Liao. "Rocket Force Commander Unusually Appointed from the Navy: Wang Houbin Takes the Role," United Daily News, August 1, (2023).
<https://udn.com/news/story/7331/7337967>.

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